The Gothic as Mass Hysteria: the Threat of the Foreign Other in Gaskell's *Lois the Witch*

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Born into a Unitarian family and married to a Unitarian minister, author of several social novels, Elizabeth Gaskell, the Victorian "Sheherezade" in Dickens' words, was particularly appreciated during her lifetime for her inborn storytelling talent that she equally exploited in her realist and Gothic shorter fiction (short stories or novellas). Her Unitarian liberal education and outlook determined her to take position against the dangers of religious fanaticism, especially since the religious confession she belonged to, in spite of its 19th century strength and status, had often been the subject of various attacks, mainly directed to the Unitarians rejection of the holy trinity[1]. Gaskell's own position towards both Unitarianism and Anglicanism that she had been fascinated with[2] from a young age speak for her lack of sectarian bias and tolerant religious attitude, which is essentially Christian in approach and transgresses from both her novels and her shorter fiction. Which is more, as a Victorian female writer, Gaskell was always torn between the two discursive options women in general, and female authors in particular had access to: preaching or silencing. Her social novels, *Mary Barton* (1848), *North and South* (1856) and *Ruth* (1853), as well as *Cranford* (1853) play with both preaching and silencing, with what is said or taught to the audience and what remains unuttered, while her Gothic stories proved to be her chance to give up this frustrating game and develop techniques of displacing unpleasant truths into familiar figures and thus direct her criticism against them.

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[1] By the mid of the nineteenth century, Elizabeth Gaskell's husband, minister William Gaskell, synthesized the essence of this doctrine in one of the numerous religious-centred texts, *Strong Points of Unitarian Christianity*: "*We say that God is one, not Three in one*; we say that Christ was a true, real, noble man, not a person in the trinity, equal with the Father, of whom he affirmed He is greater than I; *we say that we are born weak and fallible, but not tainted with sin, and ordained to depravity and hell; that we are created capable of good, and that our mission is to promote it* […]" (in Fryckstedt, 1982: 76, *emphasis added*).

[2] Jenny Uglow mentions Elizabeth Gaskell's worshiping in the church on Sunday and her penchant for the Anglican liturgy (1993: 35), while Enid Duthie recalls her schooldays at Stratford when she habitually worshiped at Holy Trinity, together with the Miss Byerleys, also of Unitarian background (1980: 151).

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Gaskell's penchant for the supernatural and the macabre animated, much to her friends' delight, the long evenings they spent by the fire. "The supernatural always had a strong attraction for Mrs. Gaskell, and her imagination could not fail to concern itself with those human delusions which are closely connected with the terrors largely fed by an instinctive tendency to which her mind was no stranger", A.W. Ward noted at the beginning of the 20th century (in Martin, 1989: 29). What we could infer from Ward's statement is that her own attitude towards superstition was ambivalent, but it underpins even more her fascination with the relationship between superstition, mental health and control or delusive states. Therefore, the Gothic as a literary mode, highly appreciated by the Victorian audience, proved to be the answer to her fascination. Still, with Gaskell, we witness a reinterpretation of the Gothic paradigm starting from the Unitarian conviction that "evil is no mystery at all", that "it had no supernatural or abstract existence" but laid in the "irrational social structures and ignorant attitudes" (Styler, 2010: 34) that could be explained, understood and cured. We have avoided the use of the term genre mainly because we subscribe to Haggerty's assessment of the Gothic as a "mode of presentation that makes anything possible" (Haggerty, 1989: 14), supported by Fleenor's own definition of the (Female) Gothic as "essentially formless, except as a quest" (1983: 15). Gaskell herself was involved in such a quest through her own experiments, through the progress of her narrative technique and the continuous reinterpretation of what the Gothic might mean. This is traceable from one tale to another, from one short-story to another, to reach one of its most accomplished versions in *Lois the Witch* (1859), with its analysis of the liberating but also devastating effects of repressed sexual desire and the religious fanaticism deriving from mere superstition or the hysteria associated to it, which reveals a much more subversive author, a perceptive observer of mass psychology and popular behaviour. More than any other horror tale, Lois' story shows Gaskell's awareness of the existence of extreme religious attitudes not only in the New World but also in Old England, a theme that she had already touched in 1850 in *The Heart of John Middleton* by mentioning the persecuted Lancashire witches, or in the opening paragraph of *An Accursed Race* (1855)[3]. Her novella is an excellent exercise of understanding the mechanisms of popular delusion, and a successful one if we analyze it against Gustave Le Bon's theoretical essay on the psychology of the crowds.

Published serially in Dickens' *All the Year Round* in 1859, the novella mirrors the socio-religious background of her time. Thus, not only did it accompany worrying descriptions of Protestant religious revivals[4], women revivalists' behaviour being put under scrutiny by frequent conservative reports on the figure of the hysterical woman, but it also reflected the 19th century preoccupation with popular behaviour and the psychology of the crowds. Therefore, it engaged, indirectly, in the debate generated by the anxiety provoked by this new nineteenth-century figure, the woman who speaks with a powerful voice, a voice that was seen, by all means, instable and hysterical. This picture of the female voice as hysterical was rounded up

3 See: http://www.amazon.co.uk/Accursed-Race-Elizabeth-Cleghorn-Gaskell-ebook/dp/ B0082XMDS4.
4 See: http://www.pentecostalpioneers.org/1859UlsterRevival.html.

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by the commonly accepted medical belief that women's physical and emotional vulnerability explained their natural predisposition for hysteria. Gaskell's attack on this discriminating conviction is metaphorically expressed in the retelling of the episode of the Salem witch hunt, an opportunity for her to trace the stages of hysterical behaviour that spreads throughout a whole community, regardless of sex, and turns into mass hysteria, as well as of the behavioural mechanisms that facilitate such a conduct. Her novella responds then not only to the debates engendered by the "1859 Ulster Revival", but fits into and is informed by the broader scientific discussions on mental epidemics and human nature, behaviour and beliefs and reflects the oscillation between the fascination stirred by superstitions and oral traditions that she inserts in her ghost stories, and her rational and scientifically informed interpretation of their power over the Victorian mind. David Brewster, William Benjamin Carpenter, Thomas Laycock, Charles Mackay and Gaskell's own cousin Henry Holland, are only some of the names of those who had directed their attention towards mental health, mental epidemics, the border between the supernatural and the occult and its consequences on popular imagination. A direct public intervention into the scientific debates of the time would have been practically impossible for Gaskell, so she uses the fictional tribune and the remote episode of the Salem witch hunt to displace spatially and temporally her criticism on popular delusive behaviour. Thus, the narrative Gaskell develops in *Lois the Witch* mirrors, for example, Charles Mackay's observation according to which "We find whole communities fix their attention upon one object, and go mad in its pursuit: that millions of people become simultaneously impressed with one delusion, and run after it, till their attention is caught by some new folly more captivating than the first" (qtd in Henson, 2002: 252).

Gaskell had long been fascinated by witch-hunts, and the New World, and her writing was well documented historically (see Uglow, 1993: 475-476) but the essence of her approach to witchcraft and witches is that they "are created by the hysterical imagination, and irrational projection of anxieties onto those deemed outsiders" (Styler, 2010: 40). This clash between the One and the Other is underpinned by her setting of the action into the New World, where evil is identified with the uncontrolled power of privileged structures and discourses over unprivileged categories (be they gender, class, religion or all of them). Besides, while Old England is identified with the warmth of the parental home and with stability the piece of land Lois reaches bears, from the very beginning, the marks of instability and strangeness:

> In the year 1691, Lois Barclay stood on a little wooden pier steadying herself on the stable land,[…] It seemed as strange now to be on solid earth as it had been, not long ago, to be rocked by the sea, […]; and the aspect of the land was equally strange (Lois, 3)[5].

Each of the three parts of Gaskell's novella matches one stage in the description of the Salem community's delusional behaviour that will eventually lead to Lois's death. The first chapter describes Lois' first contact with New England by

[5] The excerpts are taken from *Elizabeth Gaskell, Lois the Witch*, Hesperus Press Ltd, UK, 2003.

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means of a series of suggestive stories, such as the one she hears in Widow Smith's house, of the log which turned out to be an Indian in disguise, or that of the French Papist pirates ravaging the coast, or that of a woman's blood-chilling wail: "Lord Jesus! Have mercy upon me! Save me from the power of man, O Lord Jesu!" (Lois, 11). Imminent danger and mystery seem to govern over Salem, but the real danger resides, as the woman's prophetic words foreshadow: "in the power of man", a danger that Captain Holdernesse himself is aware of and against which he tries to warn Lois: "Folk get affrighted of the real dangers, and in their fright imagine, perchance, dangers that are not" (Lois, 12), which prefigures a world constructed on the clash between appearances and reality. People's uncontrolled imagination in a community that is at war with itself is the real danger Lois will have to deal with. Lois's own innocent recollection of one moment in her childhood introduces the theme of witchcraft as related to religious persecution, the detail that foretells Lois' own violent death under the accusation of witchcraft. Back in her father's parish of Barford, Lois had witnessed the drowning of a witch, an old woman who had cursed her because her father had not tried to save her: "Parson's wench, parson's wench, yonder, in thy nurse's arms, thy dad hath never tried for to save me, and none shall save thee, when thou art brought up for a witch" (Lois, 13).

Gaskell's picture of this vengeful and extremely cruel act: "I saw old Hannah […] her face bloody and black with the stones and mud they had been throwing at her, and her cat tied round her neck" (Lois, 13), fosters Gustave Le Bon's remark that once they become part of a crowd, people, even if highly educated, lose their capacity of critical thinking and behave emotionally, making proof of primitive and barbarian acts (Le Bon 1937/1990: 26). In this case the impossibility to find an explanation for a series of misfortunate events in the town of Barford, determines its inhabitants to look for scapegoats and associate those events with some ominous supernatural powers.

Lois' journey through the encircling green forest stands for a symbolical passage into the unknown and the unfamiliar, into the small community's deepest and most repressed feelings and concerns. Her own feelings of fright are projected onto the landscape, onto "the deep green forest" that "tangled into heavy darkness" into a kind of one-way road, which induces to the reader the atmosphere of horror and ominous presence, while "the cries of strange birds" and their "unwonted colour" induces to the imaginative or unaccustomed traveller the idea of war-whoops and painted deadly enemies" (15).

Lois's arrival in the Hickson family makes the shift towards the second part of the novella that works as both an investigation of the psychodynamics of a dysfunctional family's relationships, and of the triggers that lead to the outburst of mass hysterical behaviour.

The town itself, within its double circle of stockades, bears sign of ambivalence and dysfunctionality symbolized by the two meeting houses in town. The poetics of space in the Puritan community is centred around an element that secured and contributed to the maintenance of the three Puritan guiding principles (method, discipline and order), in the shape of the meeting house or the church, and which functioned as an *axis mundi* around which the whole life of the community turns. Both visually and culturally the town's center, the Congregational Church was

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the place where the religious and the secular met in an attempt to reshape, to correct, to keep consciences awake, and build a moral discipline in which self-control and methodical endeavour were the way to salvation and saintliness. Nucleus of the country town, the meetinghouse was the place where individuals became a homogeneous group, where chaos became order and ensured the continuity of the community. Gaskell de-centres the nucleus into nuclei which prefigures instability and a community whose mindset is at war with its own values, anxieties and obsessions. The spatial misbalance predicts the mental misbalance in the Hickson family, as well as the town's own emotional vulnerability, since the novella provides an example of how the homogenous group can turn into a hysterical mass in the name of religious faith and salvation.

Lois's identity within her uncle's family is denied as soon as she arrives there: "'I know nothing of her', said the mistress of the house, in a deep voice, almost as masculine as her son's" (16). Roles within the family are reversed, the supposed head of the family, Lois' uncle, is in reality weak, invalid and passive, and was practically replaced by his stern wife, Grace Hickson, New England born and bred, and therefore holder of the privileged discourse. The person who greets her is Manaseh, her cousin, bizarre epitome of the religious young man, who studies theology and the works of the Fathers, for he is meant to become the head of his family much to his mother's pride. Nevertheless, his outwardly sober and brave attitude hides an inwardly instable personality, and a natural predisposition for mental misbalance. She also meets Faith, the elder daughter, who has secretly but passionately fallen in love with one of the pastors, pastor Nolan, while Prudence, the younger turns out to be a malicious child. By means of a sharp authorial intervention we find out that "if Lois had been a physician of modern times, she might have traced somewhat of the same temperament in his sisters as well – in Prudence's lack of natural feeling and impish delight in mischief, in Faith's vehemence of unrequited love" (44). Thus, their names, Grace, Faith and Prudence, standing for abstract spiritual virtues apparently identifiable in their contained and pious stance, contrast sharply with their darker selves. Grace is a harsh and stern woman, Faith an agnostic and Prudence oscillates between emotional moods that already introduce the notion of hysteria. In one of Faith's passionate outbursts we find out that the emotion that dominates her is hate: "I hate Mr Tappau! said Faith, shortly, a passionate flash of light coming out of her dark, heavy eyes" (26).

Lois, the Anglican young, beautiful and generous girl both fascinates and is perceived as a menace, ironically due to her generosity and serenity, but mainly because of her religion: "Mother says thy home was with the ungodly" (27). Within her aunt's family, Lois's genuine innocence and loving personality and health mindedness represents the threat of the Other and she becomes the scapegoat "onto whom the anxieties of the normal/privileged are projected" (Styler, 2010: 41). On a larger scale, Styler shows "this paradigm is applied to Calvinist theology, whose category of the reprobate can be traced as the 'error' that permits the execution of innocent women as devils incarnate" (*Ibidem*). Lois becomes their exponent. Ironically, Widow Smith and captain Holdernesse's joke regarding Lois's feminine charm and 'bewitching' power, eventually becomes her curse: "And I don't doubt

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but what the parson's bonny lass has bewitched many a one since, with her dimples and her pleasant ways – eh, Captain Holdernese?" (14).

Her surprisingly feminine appearance is what pastor Nolan notices when he first meets Lois, while the narrator's commentary defines Lois, one more time as different from the rest of the household: "formerly he had seen only grave, solemn, rigid, or heavy faces, and had been received with a stiff form of welcome, very different from the blushing, smiling, dimpled looks that innocently met him with the greeting of an old acquaintance" (38). She will have to face the jealousy of her two adolescent cousins and the obsessive passion and sexual impositions of their brother whose mental disturbance is concealed by his protective mother. The development of Lois' relationship with her cousins highlights the growth of antipathy into hate, and of suspicion into indubitable evidence; under the circumstances facts will only be perceived globally, and they will determine a behaviour fuelled only by simple and exaggerated feelings. In Manasseh's case, her beauty unleashes madness crises, triggers hallucinating episodes in which Lois appears predestined to him or to a violent death.

> The visions come thick upon me […] I saw my soul, between sleeping and waking, the spirit come and offer thee two lots; and the colour of one was white like a bride's, and the other was black and red, which is being interpreted as violent death. […] An when the black and red dress fell to the ground, thou wert even as a corpse three days old (Lois, 41-42).

His desperate interpretation of his vision as "the" predestined calling fits into the Calvinist doctrine that provided people with a strong sense of sin, chaos and disorder closely related to an even stronger feeling of fear and anxiety. Therefore, order, method an discipline were both the principles and the answer the Puritans gave to all contradictory states and to the feeling of insecurity caused by the uncertain character of grace and redemption, which was asserted in the doctrine of predestination. Being himself caught by method, discipline and order, in the quest of a 'calling' that would free him from sinfulness and disorder, Manasseh obsessively imagines his salvation lies in his marriage to Lois, who will constantly reject his proposal, being simply terrified with Manasseh's "wild, ominous presence". Lois' audacity to reject "this man esteemed a hero by most of those around him, simply because he was the only man in the family" is Gaskell's chance to launch her criticism on gender privileges, and on the social circumstances that determine girls to succumb "to their apparent fate" (Lois, 34).

But Lois is different and she will have to pay for being different. Thus, Gaskell builds her paradigm of female Gothic on Lois's conflict with the values of the community she enters; therefore her nightmare will derive from her insecurity and sense of ambiguous identity, from her strive to find within the limitations to which she is subject, a way to act. She will be condemned to live the nightmare of ever doubting the consequences and results of her behaviour. Her rejection is an act of rebellion against the authority with which Manasseh had been invested on grounds of his gender and she remains a lonely stranger among the community she does not identify with and for which therefore she is abnormal, since the community is neither willing nor ready to accept its own abnormality.

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Lois shares her status of an outsider, of the Other, with Nattee, the old Indian servant who, in her turn, both frightens and fascinates with her enchanted words and terrifying stories. Nattee, with her weird tales of the wizards of her race, told over the kitchen fire, and which make "Lois's blood run cold" (Lois, 24) is atypical among Gaskell's servants who are usually comforting presences. But Nattee's tales add to the overall atmosphere of deceiving appearances, just like the lurid light of the fire reverses "the shadows of all the faces around". Again the flames are no longer those of a cosy, homely fire but seem to bear some malefic power, while Nattee's stories of good turned into evil aliment with "a strange, unconscious pleasure in her power over her hearers-young girls of the oppressing race" (Lois, 24), Faith and Prudence's hysterical imagination: "Or there were spells – so Nattee said – hidden about the grounds by the wizard, which changed that person's nature who found them" (Lois, 24).

Nattee's mysterious stories[6], and Lois's stories of Halloween rituals practiced by unmarried young girls work as an alternative discourse, a subversive act of self-definition by means of their secret knowledge and power although, in Lois' case the stories are only meant to "cheer up poor Faith" (Lois, 28), but they will prove to be a dangerous play whose consequences will eventually fall back upon themselves. Nevertheless, this alternative discourse reinforces their status on the side of the Otherness, while the hysteria it generates will spread like deadly contagion within the closed community, and will eventually fall upon one of Nattee's people, pastor's Tappau's Indian Servant Hota and upon herself who will be imprisoned and hanged with Lois. The association between the stories and the existence of a hidden, obscure knowledge hidden behind them will arise the suspicion of witchcraft which will grow stronger and stronger until: "The rumour of witchcraft was like the echo of thunder among the hills. […] There was hardly a family without one of these supposed victims" (Lois, 52).

People's imagination plays an essential part here, since there is nothing Le Bon states, that makes a stronger impression than memorable images: "and the constant dwelling of the thoughts, even with horror, upon certain possibilities, or what was esteemed as such, really brought about the corruption of imagination at last, which at first they had shuddered at" (Lois, 49). It is neither the facts nor the events as such, Gaskell shows prefiguring Le Bon's analysis of the crowds' mindset, which affect popular fantasy, it is the way in which they are presented. Thus, Gaskell depicts how images, words, or the combination of words into specific formulae mesmerise crowds, weakening the power of experience and reason when they are recalled through words and formulae that may acquire magical power: "and the dreadful question immediately suggested itself, 'Is anyone possessing an evil power over me, by the help of Satan?" (Lois, 49).

[6] "There ran through these stories always a ghastly, unexpressed suggestion of some human sacrifice being needed to complete the success of any incantation to the Evil One; and the poor old creature, herself believing and shuddering as she narrated her tale in broken English, took a strange, unconscious pleasure in her power over her hearers – young girls of the oppressing race, which had brought her down into a state little differing from slavery, and reduced her people to outcasts on the hunting – grounds which had belonged to her fathers" (24).

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The story reaches its climax when Pastor Tappau's young daughters are seized with hysteria interpreted as demoniac possession caused by witchcraft, while the Indian servant Hotta, whose name had been mentioned during one of the children's delirious moments before the assembled community is convicted and imprisoned. Crowds, Le Bon would argue several decades later, can only sense simple and extreme feelings. The opinions, the ideas or the beliefs that are suggested to them are either accepted or rejected by all members of the crowd and are taken as absolute truths or errors: "Every impulsive or unaccustomed action, every little nervous affection, every ache or pain was noticed, not merely by those around the sufferer, but by the person himself" (Lois, 49), It is Grace Hickson, the respected and respectable matriarch in the community that would testify to the community of the so called bewitching of the Tapau's daughters.

> Evil nature! Daughters, Satan is abroad-is close to us; I have this very hour seen him afflict two innocent children, as of old he troubled those who were possessed by him in Judea. […] and truly, as I turned round at her words, I saw a creature like a shadow vanishing, and turned all of a cold sweat. Who knows where he is now? (Lois, 46).

Grace's suggestion of the ominous presence among them will eventually lead to self-suggestion in Prudence's case and will stand as a strong proof for the rest of the community. Her status within the community automatically puts on weight and credibility to her words, which are subsequently taken as absolute truth, an allusion to the fact that emotional crowds are gullible, always ready to take as a matter of fact the most surprising statements; therefore they can be manipulated by means of imagination. As a consequence of their gullibility, crowds are easily excitable and cannot be determined through arguments.

> All Salem poured out towards the house of the minister. There was a look of excitement on all their faces; eagerness and horror were depicted on many, while stern resolution, amounting to determined cruelty, if the occasion arose, was seen on others (Lois, 52).

The next to fall as a victim of the town's already uncontrolled imagination is Lois herself. She is the second to suffer from Prudence's induced hysterical condition as a result of her desire to attract as much notice as the Tappau children, and from Faith's smouldering resentment and vengeful tendencies at the thought of having lost pastor Nolan's love to Lois: "he cares not for me' said Faith. 'He cares more for Lois's little finger than for my whole body', the girl moaned out" (Lois, 44).

The events in the narrow circle of the Hickson family acquire new meanings when set on the broader historical context of the town of Salem, which "had lost by death, within a very short time preceding the commencement of my story, nearly all its venerable men and leading citizens- men of ripe wisdom and ripe counsel" (Lois, 44). The Puritan patriarchal order, where male rule is unquestioned and absolute, is therefore threatened twice: by the confusion within its community and the dissension among its leaders which replicates the paradigm of "the one" and "the other". In this paradigm pastor Nolan represents the Other, previously forced to leave the town because of "a great division in the religious body" won by Pastor

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Tappau, "the leader of the more violent, and ultimately, the successful party" (Lois, 37). The loss of the "beloved fathers" who "had been looked up to as judges in the land", symbols of an absolute but binding authority leads to alienation of people who "had till then been bound together by the ties of friendship and relationship" (Lois, 44).

The mass-hysteria that follows Prudence's denunciation of Lois as witch bewilders Lois and throws her into a dream-like state "speechless and tongue-ties", "with every eyes fixed upon her in hatred and dread" (Lois, 69). The scene that follows traces the dimensions of broken loose popular opinion that reaches paroxysmal dimensions shortly after: "Here and there girls, women uttering strange cries, and apparently suffering from the same convulsive fit as that which had attacked Prudence, […] muttered much and savagely of witchcraft" (Lois, 70).

The nightmare-like atmosphere destabilises Lois, even if for an instance, making her doubt of herself: "and Lois thought- so near to delirium had she come- if her aunt condemned her it was possible she might indeed be a witch" (Lois, 70) but she is roughly called to reality, by the feeling of the cold iron on her feet and in the end she refuses to confess an imaginary crime, even to save her life. Words flow naturally and easily from her lips, as a proof of her preserved moral integrity in the middle of a crowd that seems to have lost its own: "I am not a witch". In a circular manner the scene of Lois and Nattee's way to the gallows recalls the one Lois had witnessed in her childhood:

> […] the outrageous crowd below began to hoot and yell. Lois redoubled her efforts to calm and encourage Nattee, apparently unconscious that any of the opprobrium, the hootings, the stones, the mud, was directed towards herself (Lois, 86).

Gaskell restages Lois' former experience only to show that driving their force from their number which also induces the idea of their being invincible, the exacerbated power they feel they possess, under the protection of anonymity, annihilates that feeling of responsibility that always deters people from performing criminal acts. They mirror each other's feelings, and intensify them by means of emotions, mimicry and gestures. Nevertheless, her last desperate cry: "Mother!" (Lois, 86) seems to touch a sensitive chord as the crowd stops "with hushed breath, with a sudden wonder, like a fear of deadly crime, fallen upon them".

The juror's statement openly repenting for, and admitting their terrible delusion that Gaskell inserts in the epilogue of this novella re-authorizes her intervention into the social and religious discourse, which in this story is achieved through the voice of a detached narrator, acting as a historical recorder and observer, never letting the reader forget that; "The sin of witchcraft. We read about it, we look on it from the outside; but we can hardly realize the terror it induced" (Lois, 46). A plead for tolerance and a critique against religious persecutions, the paradigm that Gaskell creates in this short story is timeless, and reveals the Victorian Sheherezade's exquisite skills of mass behaviour observer, as well as her accuracy and acumen in achieving the picture of the destructive power of mass hysteria triggered both by repressed feelings, and the rejection of Otherness.

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The Gothic as Mass Hysteria: the Threat of the Foreign Other in *Lois the Witch*

The paper focuses on Elizabeth Gaskell's revision of the female Gothic, where Evil does no longer belong to the supernatural realm but comes into being from erroneous and unbalanced behaviour. Our intention is to reveal Gaskell's accuracy and acumen in achieving the picture of the destructive power of mass hysteria as rejection of Otherness, of its implications and consequences in a way that was several decades later theorized by the social psychologist Gustave Le Bon in *The Crowd: A study of the Popular Mind* (1896). Gaskell's own analysis of mass hysterical behaviour points at the three categories subsequently detailed by Le Bon: suggestibility, contagion, and anonymity. Making use of a highly symbolical composition and of various forms of excess (visual, lexical, or formal), Gaskell's Gothic shorter fiction proved to be the perfect means for her to express repressed concerns an obsessions that she could not fully develop in her social novels. The novella *Lois the Witch* (1859) works therefore as a metaphorical but powerful intervention into the social, political and religious discourse of the 19th century.

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